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ABSTRACT

The individual writing conference is one of the key settings in which adults are taught to write. Success in the conference can be connected both to its structure (who can talk when and how much, and what types of talk are sequenced in what ways) and to the content within that structure (what topics are discussed, the amount of collaboration between student and teacher in sustaining topics, and so on). In one study of such conferences, tape recorded conversations between one teacher and four students were analyzed for content and structure. The analysis of the first introductory conference revealed that the conferences were teacher controlled and centered around a discussion of the student's past experiences with writing and a review of the student's first writing sample. The substantive topic that the teacher initiated most frequently differed for the stronger students and weaker students and differed according to ethnic group. For the stronger students, most of the teacher-initiated talk centered around idea development. For the weaker students, talk centered around mechanics, revision, and issues of strategy. Another interesting difference in the topics of conversation was affective. The teacher spent a great deal of time praising the stronger students and very little time, if any, praising the weaker students. Stronger students knew how to initiate praise, but the weaker students behaved and spoke in a manner that might have alienated the teacher. (HOD)

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Student Teacher Conversations about Writing: Shifting Topics in the Writing Conference

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, San Francisco, March, 1982

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Introduction

In composition research today, much attention has been paid to studying the writing process. However, very little attention has been paid to the teaching process and how it interacts with how students come to write as they do. The ethnographic work of Graves (1980) has demonstrated how important a role the events in the classroom play in the student's early acquisition of written language. Lily Fillmore (1982 and in press), doing research on second language acquisition, also has found that the type of classroom environment plays a powerful role in the rate of young children's acquisition of English when they go to school speaking only Chinese or Spanish. I have found that for adults learning to write, the influence of schooling also appears to be great (Freedman, 1980; Freedman, 1981). The basic message is that teaching matters and must be considered when we do research on learning.

The research I will report on today involves one attempt to study how adults learn to write. For this pilot study, I have examined one key teaching event in some detail--the individual writing conference. One way to learn about the interaction

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between teaching and learning is to study the language of the classroom or, in this case, the language of the conference; indeed, the rather full tradition of research on classroom language (e.g., Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1972; Mehan, 1979; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982) and on conversation in general (e.g., Sachs, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1972; Labov & Fanschel, 1977) provide the methodological foundation for this study of the writing conference.

I chose to study the conference because it is one of the key settings in which adults are taught to write, and it has not been studied extensively. I felt that by studying the interaction between student and teacher in the conference I could develop hypotheses about what makes conferences successful specifically and hypotheses about how teachers influence student writers generally. For the pilot study, I defined success in the conference in two ways-- (1) by preselecting a known, successful teacher and (2) by marking students' improvement on their papers. In a future study, I plan also to have the student and teacher participants independently identify points during the conference when learning was occurring (Erickson & Schultz, 1977).

I felt that success in the conference would be connected both to its structure (who can talk when and how much; what types of talk are sequenced in what ways) and to the content within that structure (what topics are talked about, the amount of collaboration between student and teacher talk in sustaining topics, the amount of focus on different topics, and who initiates talk and how often talk gets initiated on certain

topics).

I had three aims for my study: (1) to develop a discourse analysis system which would be helpful to composition researchers and others interested in analyzing the language of instruction, (2) to obtain, by using the analysis system, findings that would be interesting to writing teachers, and (3) to provide more general hypotheses about the successful teaching and learning of writing in other settings (e.g., the classroom, peer response groups, written comments on student papers). I will devote the rest of this talk to a description of the discourse analysis system and to an illustration of the findings it can yield.

By way of background, to begin my pilot study, I collected a set of tape recordings of naturally occurring college-level writing conferences. I began with one teacher and eight students. The teacher was chosen because of her excellent teaching record; the students were chosen to represent the cross section of ethnic groups and verbal aptitude levels in her class. I collected four conferences, spaced across a semester's time, for each student.

Analysis System

The linguistic analysis consists of two levels: structure and content. I will only discuss the semantic or content analysis today. Other parts of the analysis system are described in my paper in the Proceedings of the Texas Writing Research Group's 1981 Conference on Writing. If you would like copies of that paper either ask Les Faigley how to obtain copies of the proceedings or let me know after this presentation and I can send you a copy of my paper. The semantic analysis consists of two

layers: idea units or focuses of consciousness (Chafe, 1980) and topics of conversation (Keenan & Schieffelin, 1976; Covelli & Murray, 1980; Shuy, 1981).

Idea units

Chafe defines the idea unit as a segment of discourse that coincides with a person's focus of attention or focus of consciousness. Chafe notes, "A property of spontaneous speech that is readily apparent to anyone who examines it closely is that it is produced, not in a flowing stream, but in a series of brief spurts" (p. 13). These spurts are the idea units. The main criteria for deciding upon an idea unit boundary is the intonational contour (pitch either rises or falls). Other boundary markers include pauses and syntactic markers (an idea unit tends to consist of a single clause).

By transcribing the conferences in idea units (numbering each unit and placing it on a separate line), I can measure the amount of conscious energy or focus devoted to each part of the conference conversation, compare the weight of the teacher and student focus on particular topics, and develop hypotheses about the consequences of the conference talk for the student's subsequent writing. This analysis allows one to measure the amount of verbal focus on a topic during a conference and then to determine whether or not the amount of focus is related to successful teaching and learning on that topic or, in the case of a general topic such as teacher praise, how essential it is to effective teaching and learning.

So far, only some parts of the pilot data have been

transcribed into idea units. In a study supported by NCTE, I am now collecting conference data from twelve teachers at two universities. This data will be transcribed into idea units, and two coders will have to agree independently on the idea unit boundaries. With my new data I will be able to compare the foci across teachers and schools, as well as across students and across time with the same student.

Topics of conversation

The next step in the semantic analysis involves dividing the conference into topics of conversation. The analysis is akin to the propositional analysis of written texts (e.g., Kintsch, 1974; Fredericksen, 1975; Meyer, 1975). Just as those analyzing written expository texts have found that propositions are arranged hierarchically, I have found a similar arrangement of the topics of conversation in the conference. Experiments on the comprehension of written texts have revealed that the hierarchically higher levels are easier to remember than the lower levels. I hypothesize that in the conference those topics that are developed most by both student and teacher (those containing the most idea units), and those that the student initiates frequently and successfully (i.e., the teacher responds), are remembered best by the student after the conference and have the most potential of being used by the student when writing or when revising future papers (if the substance of the topic is relevant to such activities).

As when coding idea units, independent coders identify the topic shifts and the shifts in levels of development of given topics. In the pilot study, we have found it possible to

identify the topic shift boundaries reliably. After identifying these boundaries, two coders jointly decide on labels for the substance of the topics. This procedure involves the coders in making decisions not only about labels but also about when the same topic is recycled at a later point in the discourse. We are still developing this labeling procedure. At present, it does not appear possible or desirable to develop a mutually exclusive category system for the topics of conversation in the conference. The topics, we have found, vary from one conference to the next, and frequently a speaker talks on several topics at once.

Next I will report the results of this semantic analysis for the first conference of the semester for four students in the class of the one excellent teacher described earlier. The four students represent the range of verbal and ethnic groups in the class--one high verbal Caucasian, one high verbal Chinese-American, one low verbal Caucasian, and one low verbal Japanese-American. All students were born in the United States and are native speakers of English.

Results

General topics

These introductory conferences center around a discussion of: (1) the student's past experiences with and current feelings about writing; (2) a review of the student's performance on an in-class test, the College English Placement Test; and (3) a review of the student's first writing sample. The teacher controls these high level events in the conference; the student may introduce a higher level topic only at the end of the

session, after the teacher has indicated that she is finished with her agenda (Freedman, 1980). Also, students introduce their lower level topics very carefully and politely, usually in the form of an indirect speech act (Searle, 1975), often in the middle of a conversational turn and hidden within a response to a teacher's question. These frequently take the form of "yes to X, but now I want to ask about Y (Freedman, 1980; Freedman, 1981). One example in the weak Asian American's first conference follows: In discussing how this student approached a recent revision task the teacher asks, "Did you make any kind of outline? The student responds, "Uhm hum but it just didn't work. I wrote a few things that aren't complete sentences. That's the problem. See if I thought they were complete sentences, I would of probably put them in the essay." The student shifts the talk away from outlining to her problem during her process of omitting ideas if she cannot come up with a satisfactory syntactic form for them.

Substantive topics

A look at the substance of the topics initiated most by the different students and by the teacher with the different students also proves interesting. Freedman (1979) found that in a given conference students and teachers repeat certain topics over and over again, a phenomenon similar to what the patient does in a psychiatric interview (Pittenger, Hockett, & Daneky, 1960; Labov & Fanschel, 1977).

Teacher-initatied. The substantive topic that the teacher initiates most differs for the stronger students and weaker

students and differs according to ethnic group. With both stronger students, most of the talk the teacher initiates is about idea development. For the strong Chinese-American, she also discusses organization and sentence structure as frequently. With the weak Japanese-American, she initiates most talk about mechanics. With the weak Caucasian, she focuses on revision, an issue of strategy. She seems to lean toward talk about more mechanical issues with the Asian Americans, especially with the weaker of the two.

Following this theme of mechanics with the Asian Americans, she also raises the question of whether or not English was their native language. She does not initiate this question with the Caucasians. With the weaker Asian American student a great deal of time is devoted to a discussion of ESL as this student reveals her insecurity about her command of English: "there was a couple of teachers who asked me if English was my first language and I said yes, it is my first language. Then I thought am I having trouble speaking the correct way and it does make me wonder....I said am I really having trouble with English? Am I that bad or terrible in it?"

Student-initiated. The strong Caucasian, like his teacher, initiates talk about his idea development. The strong Chinese-American, unlike her teacher, initiates talk about her mechanics. The weaker Caucasian, like her stronger counterpart but unlike her teacher, initiates talk about her idea development; like her teacher, she focuses on her revision strategies. The weak Japanese-American, like her teacher, initiates talk about her mechanics; unlike her teacher, she initiates talk about her past

teachers and their level of discrimination against her. At the start of class, the minority students both worry about mechanics while the Caucasians worry about idea development.

The teacher worries about mechanics only with the weak minority student. With the weak Caucasian she focuses on strategy, and unlike with the stronger students, does not initiate talk on the student topic of idea development.

Affective topics

Another interesting difference in the topics of conversation is affective. For both stronger students the teacher spends a great deal of her time praising them; neither weaker student receives enough praise to count. Interestingly the amount of praise a student receives seems to depend, in part, on the student's behavior. Some students, it appears, know how to elicit praise from the teacher. Both stronger students spend a substantial percentage of time admitting their insecurity with their writing, exactly the type of topic that elicits the teacher's praise. Neither weaker student spends much time directly expressing insecurity in her writing. Additionally, the weaker students are not teacher-wise; they talk in ways that could easily alienate a teacher or at least not ingratiate themselves to the teacher. For example, the two weak students were interestingly blunt in the kinds of things they found appropriate to say to a teacher upon first meeting in a conference situation. For example, the weak Japanese-American kept bringing up how much she dislikes and distrusts teachers:

S: Well, I, it is true.

Like I took this Secretary Administration class,

and I was working at Kaiser as a personnel clerk

and I noticed that I learned things much better

and much faster

and my supervisor is much more patient with me

than the teacher who expected more

and who didn't really give a darn

if you failed or not.

T: Hum.

Have you found that to be true at State too in all your classes?

S: Yes

...As a whole, I found there is a lot of discrimination that's going on at this school

And I talked with other students

and they notice it too.

/Hum./

Like I was talking to this girl recently

I believe it was about two or three days ago

and she took this Psychology class last semester.

She got a B out of the teacher,

but there was this other girl

who also had the same teacher

two s-semesters ago,

uh, received a D or an F.

and she found out that if the teacher likes you

she'll give you a bad grade

.
.
.

That's why I've been feeling
I guess depressed
and lost
because I sometimes
there are not many people who
who would give you confidence
and would help you
even though a teacher might say
oh I'm always there to help you.
But when you go to them
have this attitude of I don't want to help you.
That happened to my business teacher
she always came to the classroom
and just um two students she liked.
She always said hi to them directly
/Uhm./
and then the other students
she would just ignore.

The weak Caucasian student continually admitted to the teacher, how lazy she was as a student. For example, in response to the teacher question, "Do you like to read?" she says, "I have friends and my friends are really big readers and they constantly recommending books and I just--it's laziness--I just, I mean reading takes concentration whereas television viewing you just sit there and they do all the work."

Such comments, besides being blunt and perhaps alienating the teacher for that reason, also indicate that these students do

not take full responsibility for whatever writing problems they have and thus suggest why they may not express insecurity as a writers. Notice that the weak Asian American blames prejudiced teachers for students' failures in school and that the Caucasian reveals what she perceives to be a permanent personality trait, her laziness, that will hinder her success. Somehow we need to help weaker students unlearn these behaviors that are counterproductive to learning.

After observing the weaker students' behavior differences and the teacher's unequal distribution of praise to the different students, I looked for other instances of differences among these conferences. A sample of talk that occurred toward the end of every conference proved particularly revealing in illustrating the consequences of the student-teacher interaction. This talk centers around the teacher's invitation to the student to return for additional individual meetings. On the whole, this teacher is exceptionally generous with her time and lets her students know about her generosity. However, these four students got different types of invitations. On your handout you will see these invitations transcribed into idea units. Notice that the number of teacher idea units devoted to the invitation varies from 25 for the strongest Caucasian student receives to none for the weakest Asian American. Remember, this is the same student who admits that she feels discriminated against by her teachers, and we see that, in fact, she is. But we also see why.

It is important to remember that neither the teacher nor the student is alone responsible for what happens in the conference;

rather it is the interaction between the two that leads to different results for different students. The teacher in this study tried hard to treat her students equally and was surprised by these findings. I hope that by bringing these results to a conscious level, we can begin to understand the types of student behaviors that lead even the best of us to treat students differently. Perhaps we can learn not to react in ways that prevent the weak student, who needs the most help, from getting the same kind and same amount of help that the most able get. Just as important, we must develop ways to help some of our students unlearn defensive behaviors that will cause them to continue to alienate teachers, receive unequal treatment, and in the end learn less than they otherwise might. We must do whatever we can to prevent the self-fulfilling prophecies that cause the weak to get weaker and the strong to get stronger from continuing. And we must remember that the change process involves both teacher education and student education.

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"Student Teacher Conversations about Writing: Shifting Topics in the Writing Conference"

INVITATIONS TO SEEK HELP

1. Strong Caucasian (S) and Teacher (T)

T: (1) if you think of anything,
(2) do feel free to come down.
(3) ..And talk with me
(4) ..In the office.
(5) If I go through a lesson too quickly,
(6) ..or there're points that I didn't raise,
(7) that you really wanted to ask about,
(8) and you didn't feel you had time in class to cover them,
(9) always come down.
(10) ..Or set up an appointment to meet with me.
(11) ..Uhm as a process class it's important,
(12) ..that you keep upwith the work.
/Yeah/
(13) Because you don't want to be thinking about thesis statements when you're thinking about topic sentences,
(14) ortopic sentenceswhen you'rethinking about paragraph development,
(15) or introductions and conclusions.
[You know,]
(16) when you can kinda tackle each part of the writing..itself,
[as its own..little
..what]
(17) ..as its own issue,
(18) and its own lesson.
(19) ..And you can kinda get clear at least on the principle.
(20) It takes a while to incorporate it into your writing.
(21) It takes practice.
(22) ..There's only so much I can teach you through...talking.
(23) Most of it comes from you..writing.
/Yeah/
.
.
.
(24) So if you have any questions,
(25) ...feel free to ask.
Now that's really all I needed to go through with you.

2. Strong Asian American (S) and Teacher (T)

T: (1) Well you know where my office is.
S: Yeah.
T: (2) And if you..if after a class..on a thesisstatement or something,

(4) do come down here.
(5) I try not to let,
(6) ...I really like people to ke..to keep up with the class,
(7) since it is a...what do you call process oriented class.
(8) You don't want to be thinking about thesis statements,
(9) when you're down the road looking at how to join sentences
(10) and develop sentences,
(11) or..you don't want to be thinking about topic sentences,
(12) when we're looking at how to develop..paragraphs.
(13) So that if for some reason a particular lesson seems very confusing,
(14) or you have other ideas that you wanted to discuss,
(15) do come down.
(16) ..and make use of this time.

S: Okay.

T: [Okay.
All right,]
(17) and if you think of questions later,
(18) you'll feel free to come in.

3. Weak Caucasian (S) and Teacher (T)

T: (1) Uhm...all right like I said
(2) if you have any...questions...comments..things that you want to talk to me about,
(3) ..do come down to the office
(4) ..and keep up with the course.

S: Okay.

T: (5) Feel free to come down,
(6) now that you know where it is.
(7) To visit..whatever.

S: All right.

T: Okay.

S: Is that it?

T: Yeah
..that's all
..I just essentially.....

4. Weak Asian American (S) and Teacher (T)

T: I have to go to a class now.

S: Okay.

T: Is there anything else you want to ask me?
Any final observations?

S: Is there any extra credit work we could do?

CODES:

/----/	interruption by other speaker
[----]	preliminaries to idea unit, not counted as part of idea unit
,	rising intonation
.	falling intonation
..	non measurable pause
...	measurable pause

TOPICS

	TEACHER-INIT.	STUDENT-INIT.
STRONG Cauc.	idea dev. praise	idea dev. insec.
As.Am	idea dev. (org & ss) praise	mechanics insec.
WEAK Cauc.	revision	idea dev. revision
As.Am	mechanics	mechanics past teachers